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By Pete Skiba
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In a tribute to POWs and MIAs, veterans fly flags, fire cannons and let loose 1,000 black balloons Saturday.

ALBANY, GA — With the release of 1,000 black balloons and the deafening roar of a 21-cannon salute, veterans paid tribute to POWs and MIAs Saturday in Veterans Memorial Park.

“We would like to pay tribute to the POWs and MIAs who have not found their way home,” said Ray Humphrey, America Legion Post 30 commander. “This is our first year. We will have one next year and we’d like to see this become a national tribute.”

The Albany area tribute joins another held for the third year at the Western reserve National Cemetery.

“This is a non-political tribute. It is for those in unknown graves and the prisoners of war who didn’t come back,” Humphrey said. “We will be playing retreat at the end, not taps, because we consider them to still be on duty.”

During a brief summary of missing-in-action and prisoner-of-war issues, Charles “Nick” Nicholson said that the science of DNA has helped identify many missing in military service.

As June 23, the remains of a U.S. Marine killed in action in World War I were laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery, according to the website usmc.mil. The remains of First Sgt. George Humphrey of Ithaca, New York, were found in September.

DNA and dental records allowed the remains to be identified so that after 90 years Humphrey could return to his country to be buried in a flag-draped coffin.

“There were 86,981 who won’t see their flag again,” Nicholson said. “It is highly unlikely any missing from World War II are still alive.”

Vietnam war veterans at the event said that about 55 MIAs from their conflict had recently been identified and returned home, including four U.S. Air Force Airmen on June 14.

“I don’t think we should ever forget these MIAs and POWs,” said Don Gibson, a Vietnam War veteran. “We should never give up hope that we can bring them all home.”

Paying his respects at the tribute, U.S. Congressman Sanford Bishop, D-Albany, said he had personal reasons as well as patriotic reasons to attend the tribute.

“I have a friend who was very dear to me who was missing in action for 30 years,” Bishop said. “When I made a Congressional delegation of one to visit Vietnam and Laos to look into the matter of MIAs, it was a coincidence he was found.”

The remains of Bishop’s friend, Thaddeus Edward Williams Jr., were identified and returned to America in December, 1998, according to the website pownetwork.org.

Bishop said he has continued his work to have the remains of veterans identified and returned home as a Vietnam War veteran patted him on the back.

“This guy has done a lot to help us bring our friends home from Vietnam,” said Leo Harrison, Veterans of Vietnam War Post 1 Albany commander.

Harrison also composed and sang a song for the tribute. Perhaps some lyrics from his POW-MIA song could sum up feelings for the day’s tribute.

*“He lost a good friend somewhere near Long Binh...
There will be no satisfaction
Till the missing in action
Are found and brought home.”*